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Out of the Attic

The history of Kwanzaa

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Image: OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org

Habari Gani? Or What's the News? This is the greeting given during the seven days of Kwanzaa. Celebrated from Dec. 26 to Jan. 1, Kwanzaa is a Pan-African holiday that commemorates family, community and culture.

It was created by Dr. Maulana Karenga, professor and chair of African studies at California State, in Long Beach. Derived from the term "Matunda ya kwanza," meaning "first fruits" in Swahili, its origins are in the first harvest celebrations of Africa.

The Swahili language is the most extensive African language spoken and was chosen by Karenga to be the language that represents Kwanzaa. Karenga is also an author and scholar-activist who stresses the indispensable need to preserve, continually revitalize and promote African American culture.

Established in 1966 in the midst of the Black Freedom Movement, Kwanzaa reflects concern for being culturally grounded in thought and practice, as well as promoting unity and self-determination. The holiday was created to serve several functions.

- First, Kwanzaa reaffirms and reestablishes African American ties to African culture.
- Second, it serves as a festival to reestablish and strengthen the bonds between African Americans and Africans as a people.
- Third, Kwanzaa emphasizes the Nguzo Saba or the Seven Principles, which are a set of ideals created by Karenga. They highlight the significance of African communal values such as family, community and culture and the best aspects of being African and human in the fullest sense.

Another common greeting during Kwanzaa is "Harambee," which means, "Let's pull together." This greeting embodies the celebration in one word and signifies the coming together of families and friends to work for the common good and to make the world a better place. Each of the Seven Principles has its own special meaning.

- Umoja or unity: To strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation and race.
- Kujichagulia or self-determination: To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves.
- Ujima or collective work and responsibility: To build and maintain our community together and make our brothers' and sisters' problems our problems and to solve them together.





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- Ujamaa or cooperative economics: To build and maintain our own stores, shops and other businesses and to profit from them together.
- Nia or purpose: To make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.
- Kuumba or creativity: To always do as much as we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited.
- Imani or faith: To believe with all our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.

The Alexandria Black History Museum will host its annual Kwanzaa Workshop Saturday, December 14, 2019, at 11 a.m. It is a family friendly, interactive workshop covering the history and principles of the holiday. It will also include activities and decorating ideas to aid in planning your own Kwanzaa celebration. Reservations are suggested. For tickets, go to <https://shop.alexandriava.gov>.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.